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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the portrayal of minority cultures in children's picture books. In picture books, the illustrations are as important as the text with respect to the meaning of the story. As a result, picture books have the potential to influence a child's view of other cultures. Currently, only three percent of picture books represent minority cultures. This results in two negative consequences: minority children may not see their own image reflected in books, and majority children may receive a distorted view of the real world. Also, the books that do represent minority cultures may represent them inaccurately or show stereotypical images. Multicultural literature introduces children to the values of other cultures. The reflection of these images should be evaluated for accuracy and presence of stereotypes. With multicultural literature, children gain a validation of their own background and values as well as an introduction to other cultures. Criteria for evaluating multicultural literature are also included. (Contains 28 references.) (JLB)

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Representation of Culture in Children's Picture Books

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America is a country that is blessed with rich cultural diversity. This diversity is not a recent phenomenon. In addition to native people, this nation was shaped by individuals from all corners of the globe whether they traveled here out of hope, desperation or coercion. At one time, newcomers to this country sought to shed evidence of their cultural heritage and blend in with mainstream America. However, in contemporary society, residents of the United States are proud of their ethnic heritage and strive to preserve its values and unique characteristics.

Classrooms mirror the diversity of American society. School children need the opportunity to explore the heritage and values of the various cultures and peoples who placed their stamp on this country and who continue to contribute to its rich ethnic diversity.

Children's literature can be used to explore and develop appreciation for cultural differences (Rasinski and Padak, 1990). Norton (1990) observes that in addition to providing anjoyument, multicultural literature benefits children in the following ways: children from an ethnic minority group can identify with and feel proud of their heritage thus boosting self-esteem; and children can recognize the commonalities shared by all ethnic groups--needs, emotions, dreams, fears. Rudman (1988) concurs, contending that ethnic groups need to see themselves reflected in literature. Their portrayal should be well-developed and offer a multi-faceted view of their heritage. According to Rudman, individuals who develop an appreciation for their own diversity are more likely to value others.

This paper will discuss the role of illustration in children's picture books. It will also examine the portrayal of minority cultures in picture book illustrations with respect to stereotypes, cultural values, and motifs. Criteria for evaluating multicultural literature will be considered.

Role of Illustration in Picture Books

By definition, the picture story book is a picture book in which words

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and illustrations have equal responsibility for telling the story (Lynch-Brown, 1993). According to Huck (1993) "a picture storybook . . . must be a seamless whole conveying meaning in both art and text" (p. 24). Schwarcz (1990) concurs and describes the picture book as "an irresistable medium" (p. 5). He observes that illustration and text work together intimately to communicate the picture book's message. The two media intertwine, complementing and extending each other in such a fashion that readers cannot understand the storyline by attending only to the text or only to the illustrations.

Illustrations in picture books sometimes simply mirror the text. At other times, pictures extend text through development of character, setting and mood. For example, in *The Rough-Face Girl*, an Algonquin Cinderella tale, the text describes the derision heaped upon the girl clad in strange clothes. It is the illustration that reveals her dignity and courage as she walked to the wigwam of the Invisible Being. In many picture books the use of metaphor and symbolism invite the reader's response. The open-ended nature of such books invites repeated exploration and varying interpretations. The initial perusal of *Lon Po Po* (Young, 1990) reveals a Red Riding Hood variant from China. Subsequent viewings show the wolf's image as part of each illustration.

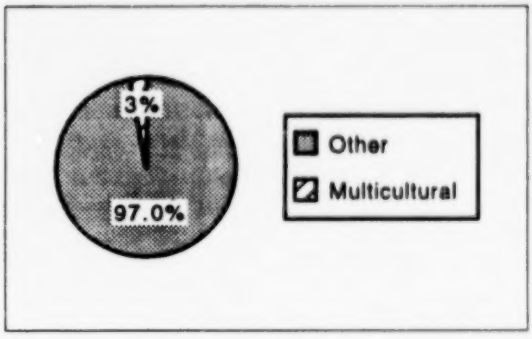
Nodelman (1992) also notes the interactive nature of text and illustration. However, Nodelman focuses upon the unique contributions of each medium. He observes that pictures are able to convey some aspects of a story more effectively than text. Illustrations can describe the characters or settings of a story with a complexity that cannot be achieved with text that is written for a young, inexpert reader. Text, on the other hand, is more effective than illustration in conveying temporal order, cause and effect, and super or subordinate order. For example, an author can state that "things went on in the same manner, day after day" more easily than an artist could draw such a concept.

In addition to the integrative, yet distinct, characteristics of words and images, Schwarcz (1990) points out that picture books are a serial art form. One illustration leads to the next one. They are interpreted holistically. This serial nature and the integration of image and word suggests a parallel between television, movies and picture books. Like television and movies, picture books also have the potential to influence a child's view of other cultures.

Portrayal of Culture In Picture Books

The number of children's books which reflect the minority experience or are written/illustrated by minority authors is quite small.

Sims (1992) estimates that in the 1990's 2% of the books published annually will reflect the African American experience. Other minority cultures are even less well represented.



Under-representation of minority cultures in picture books results in two negative consequences. First, minority children are less likely to see their own image reflected in books. Such an absence could suggest to a child that s/he is not important enough to appear in books. Second, majority children may receive a distorted view of what the world is really like. As Larrick states, "Although his light skin makes him one of the world's minorities, the white child learns from his books that he is the kingfish" (p. 63).

In addition to the scarcity of books about minority cultures, the portrayal of another culture through illustrations is sometimes innaccurate, watered-down or even stereotypical.

Stereotypes are most evident in illustrations found in older books. *Little Black Sambo* (Bannerman, 1899) with its exaggerated facial features is an obvious example. Another example is *The Matchlock Gun* (Edmonds, 1941) which portrays American Indians as tomahawk-wielding savages preying on innocent settlers. Wise's illustrations for *The Five Chinese Brothers* (Bishop, 1938), a humorous folktale, portrays brothers with distinct yellow skin, wearing coolie hats and each with a long cue hanging down his back.

Contemporary books are not free of misrepresentations, however. *Alligators All Around* (Sendak, 1962) is an alphabet book which shows alligators "imitating Indians" for the letter "I." The imitation includes feather headresses and tomahawks. Mayer's illustrations for *Everyone Knows what a Dragon Looks Like* (Williams, 1976) provide a Chinese setting but the protagonists are a caucasion child and a chubby Buddha.

Aside from stereotypes, misrepresentations continue to occur. This tendency is quite obvious in literature about American Indians. Susan Jeffers' highly acclaimed *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* (1990) depicts Seattle, a Suquamish chief from the Northwest, wearing regalia of the Lakota people, a tribe of the Great Plains. In Lynne Cherry's book, *A River Ran Wild* (1992), Native American children are painted wearing feathers, an inaccurate

portrayal. In both books, Native Americans are pictured as ghostly spirit-beings. This tacit implication that Native Americans belong to the past is offensive, according to Naomi Caldwell Wood, President of the Native American Library Association. Wood states that such ghostly portrayals imply that Native American culture is a quaint relic of the past, rather than a vital, contemporary culture.

Cultural Values In Picture Books

The values of a culture are usually evident in its folklore. In European folktales justice prevails, virtue triumphs over wickedness and characters live happily ever after as is evident in *Cinderella* or *Snow White*.

In Native American literature, placing the good of the people before personal gain is evident in *The Legend of the Bluebonnet* (dePaola, 1983). *The Story of Jumping Mouse* (Steptoe, 1984) shows the importance attached to pursuing a personal vision as does *The Legend of the Indian Paintbrush* (dePaola, 1988). The Native American folktales retold and illustrated by Goble reflect the Plains Indians belief in the interrelatedness of nature and respect for all living creatures. Goble's research into the symbols and motifs significant to Plains Indians is evident in his detailed illustrations.

Steptoe's illustrations for *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (1987) show the attractiveness and physical diversity of the characters in this African folktale. They also affirm traditional African values of hospitality and respect for elders. In this story kindness is rewarded and greed is punished. The Dillon's illustrations for *Ashanti to Zulu* (Musgrove, 1976) also reveal beauty and diversity in twenty-six different African tribes and their customs.

Taro Yashima's soft watercolor illustrations in *Crow Boy* (1955) do not focus on the individual features of characters but authentically create the atmosphere of a rural Japanese village. In this story a wise teacher respects the unique talents of Chibi and leads the villagers to respect him, too. The values of respect and loyalty are also highlighted in *The Tale of the Mandarin Ducks* (Paterson, 1990), a tale of two servants who are punished for releasing a captive duck to be with its mate. The ducks repay the servants for their kindness.

Ed Young's watercolor illustrations for *Yeh Shen* (Louie, 1982) will help children recognize the universality of human problems. Yeh Shen has the same problems and longings as her European counterpart, Cinderella. But Yeh Shen's wishes are granted by a carp, a symbol of good fortune, rather than a good fairy. Her slipper is tiny, reflecting a traditional concept of

beauty in China. Young's painted screen design contributes to the mood of *Yeh Shen* and also appear in his watercolor and pastel drawings for *Lon Po Po*, a Red Riding Hood story from China. The engaging sisters he introduces in *Lon Po Po* are more clever than the European Red Riding Hood and kill the wolf themselves by appealing to his greed for gingko nuts.

Folktakes are important repositories of cultural values but if children are only exposed to folklore, they may not recognize the contemporary features of another culture. *Our Home is the Sea* (Levinson, 1988) depicts a Chinese boy who loves his life on a boat in the river. The illustrations present a dignified picture of a way of life that is not accessible to most American children. In this way, the artist opens a window on the world for children.

The drawings in *Abuela* (Dorros, 1991) complement the warmth between grandmother and granddaughter as they fly above New York City. The grandmother's Spanish phrases add to the cultural beauty of this light fantasy. In this book, Hispanic Americans are not portrayed as impoverished, a frequent stereotypical portrayal.

Children will gain respect for the courage of modern-day pilgrims who risk everything to come to this country when they read *How Many Days to America*, (Bunting, 1988) the story of a family who rides from Cuba to Americain a small boat.

Whether folktale or fiction, multicultural literature has immeasureable value for children of all cultures. The reflection of the culture's images should be evaluated for accuracy and presence of stereotypes.

Criteria for Evaluating Multicultural Literature

Regardless of the culture of the liteature under study, certain criteria should be used in evaluating multicultural children's literature. Norton (1991) based her criteria for evaluation onthe recommendations of the Children's Literature Review Board and the Council on Interracial Books for Children. Among the criteria listed by Norton are several which apply to visual images:

1. Are members of a minority culture shown as individuals characters rather than representatives of a racial or ethnic group?

2. Does the artist avoid glamourizing minority characters?

3. Are members of a minority portrayed as physically diverse individuals or does everyone look alike?

4. Is a culture accurately and respectfully portrayed?

5. Is the setting accurate? Are members of a minority shown in one type of setting?

If an evaluation reveals flaws in a book, parents and teachers should point them out to children. Helping children to recognize stereotypes is preferable to banning or destroying less desirable books. Close inspection of books will promote children's critical thinking skills. While comparing multicultural books which accurately reflect cultures with books which do not, parents can model their own appreciation for respectful portrayals of other cultures.

Conclusion

Children who will come of age in the twenty-first century need to see their reflections in the mirror provided by children's book illustrations. They need a validation of their own background and values. They also will benefit from a glimpse through the window provided by children's books into the lives of people from another culture. The artist's images in multicultural literature give children the opportunity to see the similarity among peoples and also to appreciate the differences.

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